

EU Takes Aim at Tehran: IRGC Terror Listing Opens New Front in Europe's Iran Policy

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Besides the welcome symbolic value of taking action amid bloody regime crackdowns inside Iran, the designation gives multilateral law enforcement agencies and individual member states a powerful new tool set for limiting terrorist plots and criminal activity on their soil.

On January 29, Europe found its voice against Iran's apparatus of terror. The European Union (EU) announced that it is adding Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) to its list of designated terrorist entities. The EU spent years mulling this step and taking half measures. Now, the EU and its member states must use this new, much-needed tool broadly and effectively. The EU's designation should mark the start of Europe's campaign against the IRGC, not its end.

Formally listing the IRGC will give Europe important new authorities to limit Iranian attacks and plotting on their soil. The EU's move also has major symbolic value, particularly at a time when the Iranian regime is under pressure at home and abroad.

The EU previously sanctioned some of the IRGC's branches, leaders, and operatives. But EU member states resisted taking action against the IRGC in its entirety for several reasons, including European fears of Tehran's reaction. Iran has long been vocal in its opposition to an IRGC designation, warning in recent days that an EU label would have "destructive consequences." The U.S. unwillingness to lift its own Foreign Terrorist Organization listing of the IRGC was reportedly a key reason why U.S.-Iran negotiations fell apart during the Biden administration.

The EU designation comes on the heels of the Iranian regime's bloody crackdown against its own outraged people. The EU's decision—reached by consensus among its 27 member states—lends Europe's united voice to the Iranian protestors' indignation against their oppressors.

The EU action also sends a powerful message to Tehran that it should refrain from conducting attacks on European soil against its perceived enemies, particularly Iranian dissidents and Israeli and Jewish targets. European security officials express great concern about that risk now. Both the IRGC's deadly Quds Force and Iran's notorious Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS) have conducted numerous terrorist plots in recent years in Europe, including in Sweden, Germany, Cyprus, and Belgium. Individual European governments have disrupted and prosecuted these networks and issued statements condemning Iranian behavior, but this is the most unified and strongest European stance to date.

With the EU designation, any IRGC assets in Europe are now subject to an asset freeze. It is now illegal to provide the group with funds or resources. The designation also requires EU member states to increase police and judicial cooperation on IRGC-related criminal matters. And the EU will impose a travel ban on IRGC members hoping to visit Europe.

The Europeans should now aim to use these tools vigorously. The IRGC has historically had near global reach, not only with its terrorist cells but with its procurement and financial networks. Uncovering and disrupting the IRGC's networks and freezing their assets would weaken the corps' capabilities to rearm, profit, and funnel materiel and finances to its proxies.

Europe can and should do much more to maximize the impact of the designation and impose real costs on the IRGC and its overlords. The EU's 2013 designation of Hezbollah's so-called "military wing" offers a good model for how an EU designation can empower both the EU and its member states.

First, the EU should ensure that Europol—the EU's umbrella police agency—gets a key role in coordinating and supporting IRGC-related investigations across Europe, as Europol has done with Hezbollah. Before the EU's designation, Europol's ability to police the IRGC's operatives in Europe was greatly limited. The IRGC's many European plots often have a consistent modus operandi, including using criminal actors not associated with Iran to carry out attacks and thus offer Tehran a fig leaf of deniability. Europol is uniquely positioned to see the whole picture and share relevant information with all EU member states.

For one model, look to Europol's involvement in the complex multi-jurisdictional investigation of the Hezbollah financier Mohamad Nourredine, which involved multiple European governments as well as several U.S. law enforcement agencies. In 2018, he was convicted in a French court on multiple charges and sentenced to seven years in prison as part of a multi-country investigation codenamed "Operation Cedar." Europol could provide similar support in international investigations against IRGC operatives.

Since 2014, Europol has also played an integral role, along with the United States, in the Law Enforcement Coordination Group, the sole international body dedicated to countering Hezbollah's terrorist and illicit activity. The EU should empower Europol to do likewise for the U.S.-led Countering Transnational Terrorism Forum, which focuses on Iran-linked terrorism.

Second, European governments must follow up on the EU's actions and impose their own national bans and designations. Many European countries did just this against Hezbollah, including Germany, Slovenia, Austria, the United Kingdom, and the Baltics.

Take Germany, which shows how national-level actions can strengthen law enforcement and build on Brussels's actions. In May 2020, Germany formally banned Hezbollah and conducted near simultaneous raids on several Hezbollah-linked organizations in the country. Germany is now prosecuting a Lebanese national allegedly tied to Hezbollah for procuring drone components for the terrorist group—a scheme that also took place in the U.K. and Spain.

The EU's IRGC designation won't tip the balance of power within Iran in favor of the protestors, but it can still help

reduce Iran's ability to stage vicious attacks abroad. The EU and its member states must robustly implement these new authorities for them to have the desperately needed effect.

Michael Jacobson, a senior fellow in The Washington Institute's Reinhard Program on Counterterrorism and Intelligence, formerly served as director of strategy, plans, and initiatives in the State Department's Counterterrorism Bureau. This article was originally published on the [Cipher Brief website](https://www.thecipherbrief.com/eu-takes-aim-at-tehran-irgc-terror-listing-opens-new-front-in-europes-iran-policy)

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